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In the face of strong congressional opposition to a proposed \$20 billion sale of weapons to six Middle Eastern countries, the U.S. State Department has decided to break the sale into smaller pieces, a U.S. official said Dec. 6.

The department notified Congress on Dec. 4 of proposed sales of missile defense systems to Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and upgrades to UAE radar planes. In all, the sales would be worth about \$10.8 billion.

A State Department official said the department has postponed the more controversial sale of satellite-guided bomb kits to Saudi Arabia. News of that possible sale last July prompted nearly 250 members of Congress to sign two letters to U.S. President George W. Bush opposing the sale.

Some expressed concern that the precision bombs could be used against U.S. troops in the Middle East or against Israel. Others accused Saudi Arabia of supplying suicide bombers and insurgents to the war in Iraq.

More than a dozen lawmakers vowed to introduce a resolution of disapproval to block the sale as soon as they were officially notified of it. Official notification of the Saudi sale was expected in August, but it was postponed several times and now has been put off until 2008, a State Department official said.

The Dec. 4 notification came from the State Department's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), which announced "a possible foreign military sale" of Patriot Advanced Capability (PAC)-3 missiles to the United Arab Emirates, and PAC-3 missiles and PAC-2 missile upgrades to Kuwait.

PAC-3s are designed to shoot down theater ballistic missiles. Upgraded PAC-2s are intended

for use against theater ballistic missiles and low-altitude cruise missiles.

The United Arab Emirates would receive 288 PAC-3s and 216 enhanced guidance systems for PAC-2s. The deal would include phased-array radars, engagement control systems, antennas, radios, generators and other equipment. In all, it would be worth \$9 billion.

The proposed sale to Kuwait would include 80 PAC-3 missiles, 60 PAC-2 guidance system upgrades, radar upgrades and communications equipment. It would be worth almost \$1.4 billion.

At the same time, the DSCA announced the possible sale to the United Arab Emirates of “upgrades and refurbishments” to E-2C airborne early warning and control aircraft. That sale would be worth as much as \$437 million.

Separating the missile defense system sales and the E-2 upgrades from the precision bomb kits probably increases their chance for congressional approval. So does the timing of the notification. Once formal notification occurs, lawmakers in both houses have 30 days to pass resolutions of disapproval; otherwise, the sale goes forward. Congress is expected to be in recess for Christmas and New Year’s during most of the 30-day period.

Objections to the full \$20 billion arms deal focused almost solely on plans to sell Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs) to Saudi Arabia. JDAMs are kits that, when attached to bombs, use GPS satellite signals to guide them to targets.

Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike opposed the sale of precision-guided bomb kits and denounced Saudi Arabia for having “not been a true ally in the war on terror or furthering the United States’ interests in the Middle East.”

In a joint statement, Reps. Anthony Weiner and Jerrold Nadler, both New York Democrats, accused Saudi Arabia of supplying “the majority of suicide bombers” and nearly half of all foreign fighters in Iraq.

Meanwhile, Reps. Mark Kirk, R-Ill., and Christopher Carney, D-Pa., warned Bush that satellite

guidance kits sold to Saudi Arabia could fall into the wrong hands and be used against U.S. troops in the Middle East and against Israel.

“We want to make sure that any sale of advanced weapons does not represent a danger to the United States and our allies,” Kirk said in an interview.

Details of the \$20 billion sale were never officially disclosed, but it was believed to include air-to-air missiles, missile defense systems, fighter aircraft upgrades and patrol ships. The potential buyers were the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia.